This Secret Missile Program Lost Its Key Scientist Without a Trace

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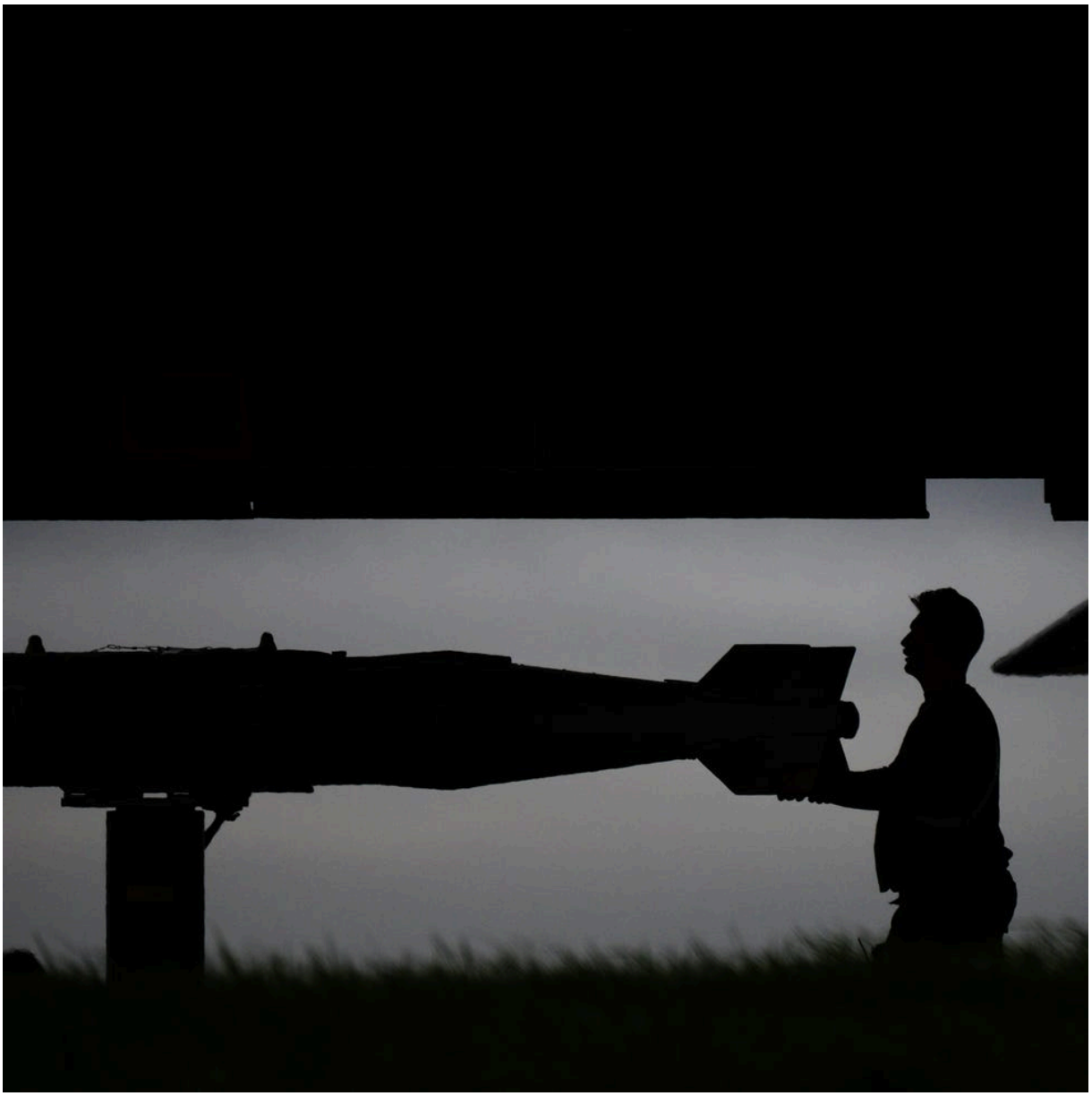

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Here's what you'll learn when you read this story:

- Egypt relied on a group of former Nazi scientists to spearhead its missile program.
- In 1962, a key player in the program—Heinz Krug—left his office, never to be seen again.

- While Heinz's ultimate fate is merely conjecture among historians, some accounts state that a brutal assassination may be to blame.

On July 21, 1962, a crowd of journalists gathered in a bleak stretch of desert near Wadi El Natrun, an ancient valley in Egypt. That day Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian president and military dictator, was determined to prove to the world that his country was a military superpower. Blasting dust everywhere, four surface-to-surface rockets shot off into the skies one after another and fell into the Mediterranean, shocking the media. Afterward, the Egyptian government celebrated with rallies, fireworks, and a plane that rained candy over Cairo as state-owned radio declared the nation had entered the "missile age" after a long effort to build up its long-range firepower.

The balance of power shifted in the Middle East overnight, sparking an arms race between Egypt and Israel, and exposing shadowy networks of former Nazi intelligence officers and rocket technicians selling their services to the highest bidder. Caught in a fierce crossfire between Israel, Egypt, and West Germany, one Nazi rocket scientist disappeared into thin air—crippling a rocket program and stumping historians for decades.

Egypt Desperately Needed Rockets

According to Michael Neufeld, PhD, former senior curator in the space history department of the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, Egypt's pursuit of Nazi rocket scientists was par for the course in a global arms race taking place at the time.

"Missile technology was spreading around the world after World War II and the Germans were only a small part of that," Neufeld says. "Egypt wanted to threaten Israel, notably in the wake of the 1956 attack on the Suez Canal by Israel, Britain, and France. The context for Nasser's interest in missiles is the Arab world's hostility to Israel that ultimately led to the 1967 and 1973 wars."

Being that powerful rockets were a natural goal for any aspiring world leader during the Cold War, Nasser—a professional soldier who swept away Egypt's old political norms with a revolution—had big ambitions. However, he faced several pressing obstacles. Egypt lacked the large-scale factory horsepower to produce rockets. Nasser's prime option at the time was a rather run-down facility in Heliopolis called Factory 333, a former British hospital converted into an aircraft engine factory. Despite its shortcomings, the factory would become the central node in Egypt's missile development program.

Another enormous problem was that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union was willing to assist Nasser in developing weapons. Never one to be put off by setbacks, Nasser decided to recruit the original pioneers of missile technology—the Germans. He approached West German Cold War spy chief Reinhard Gehlen, who ran the Gehlen Organization, an intelligence agency staffed in large part by former Nazi and SS officers. According to author and former intelligence analyst Owen L. Sirrs's book *Nasser and the Missile Age in the Middle East*, Gehlen connected Nasser with the famous Nazi military commando officer Otto Skorzeny.

The Rocket Science Team—and the Weapons They Built

Skorzeny, an Austrian, achieved fame for his expertise in daring operations behind enemy lines during World War II. Talented at intelligence gathering and speaking different languages, the charismatic Skorzeny successfully pulled off one of the world's most incredible prison breaks when he snatched Italian dictator Benito Mussolini from a mountain fortress and delivered him safely to Adolf Hitler in 1943. According to Sirrs, Skorzeny trained commandos for Nasser in Egypt for about a year before leaving—only to later reappear as a phantom in rumors about the disappearance of one of Nasser's leading rocket scientists.

Skorzeny wasn't the only Nazi who sought new opportunities in Egypt. A group of former Nazi rocket scientists (who refused to work for either the Allies or the Soviet Union after designing weapons for Hitler) arrived in Egypt in the early 1960s to help with Nasser's missile program. Among them were Wolfgang Pilz, who helped design self-guided V-1 "flying bombs," and Eugen Sänger, a rocket propulsion engineer. Other technical experts included Hans Kleinwachter and Hans Goercke.

A key linchpin to their success was the rocket scientist Heinz Krug, a close colleague of Sänger. Starting in 1958, Krug worked as a manager at the Research Institute for the Physics of Jet Propulsion in Stuttgart, Germany, and developed ties to the Egyptians. As of 1960, he allegedly became a frontman for a shell company called INTRA Commercial Company with links to the Egyptian War Ministry. Krug used his office in Munich to source, procure, and ship parts for the missiles to Egypt. He was among the staunchest advocates of Nasser's rocket program and worked hard to fulfill his critical role—not knowing that the job would ultimately lead to his misfortune.

Compensated lavishly, the scientists in 1960 kick-started two surface-to-surface missiles for Nasser with range and payloads to strike Israel. By 1961, they had already begun testing prototypes at Factory 333, the same location in Wadi al-Natrun that Nasser would hold his demonstration a year later. Additionally, teams led by the German rocket scientists began churning out missiles at two additional locations, Site 36 and Site 135, both located farther down the Nile near Memphis and Helwan. In a

short time, the Germans had succeeded in producing rockets at speed and scale. Nasser paraded 20 missiles through Cairo in 1962—sparking fears around the Middle East, especially next door in Israel. All the while, Israel was working on its own weapons program and beat Nasser to the punch, successfully launching a suborbital missile, which only added to the military dictator's paranoia. Even with the advantage, Israel wouldn't let up.

What Happened to Krug?

Feeling threatened by Egypt, Israel pressed West Germany to stop the former Nazi scientists, given that the scientists were German citizens. The German spy chief Gehlen opted for closer cooperation with Israel. Sirrs suggests West German intelligence may have directly assisted agents from Mossad—an Israeli intelligence organization—in targeting the missile program. He says evidence suggests that Mossad and the West German government used an intimidation campaign to overtly pressure the scientists to stop helping the Egyptians. German federal officials forced Sänger to resign in November 1961 from his own institute. While many scientists left the team, Krug continued to work on the missile program from his office in Munich.

Israel's campaign didn't end there. In 1962, Mossad launched Operation Damocles. Events that followed indicated that its first target was Krug, the effective lead production coordinator for the rockets. On Tuesday, September 11, 1962, Krug was working in his office when a young man came to see him, according to news reports. The man gave his name as "Mr. Saleh" and spent about half an hour chatting with Krug in his office. Then they drove off together in Krug's car.

Krug never returned, and his terrified wife quickly reported him missing. "My husband has been carried off, for he had absolutely no reason to disappear of his own free will," she told police, according to the Associated Press.

Police found the scientist's car on Friday in the Munich suburb of Solln, within driving range of several vast wooded areas. The abandoned car was caked with mud. Soon after, the police allegedly received an anonymous phone call stating that Krug was dead. Nevertheless, the police appealed to the public on television for information and launched an investigation with Interpol to uncover his whereabouts.

In the wake of Krug's alarming disappearance, more German scientists working in Egypt were targeted. Pilz's secretary opened a letter bomb that left her blind from the explosion. Another letter bomb killed five Egyptians and wounded six at another rocket factory office the next day. Kleinwachter, a stubborn holdout, barely avoided being shot by a trio of Mossad agents in 1963 in Bavaria, escaping with a bullet hole

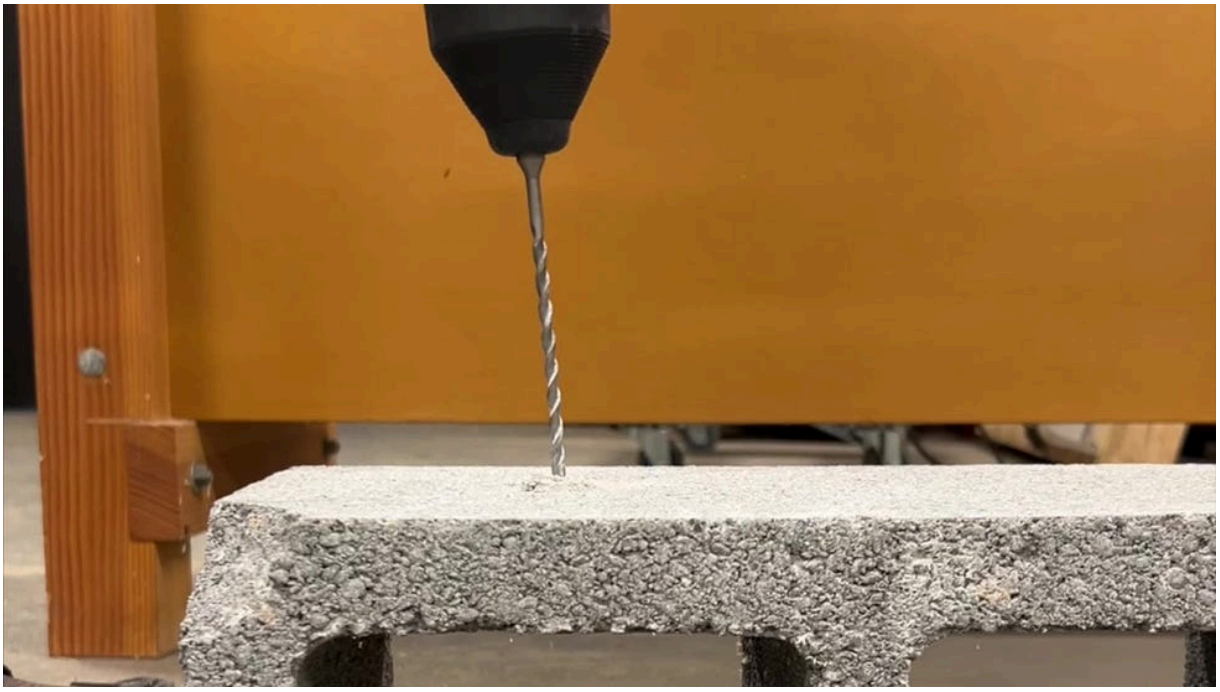
through his neck scarf. He publicly accused the West German government of deliberately failing to protect him.

The German government, in turn, ended all financial contracts with any companies involved in Egyptian missile parts procurement and sent formal warning letters to all scientists in 1963 urging them to cease their activities. A few scientists persisted until 1964, but they lived in fear—carrying guns for protection and screening all their mail for explosives.

Krug's fate and the possible whereabouts of his body—if indeed he died—remain unknown, nothing more than conjecture among historians. Some reports allege he was spirited away to Austria and lived out the rest of his life under an assumed name. Other accounts suggest that he met with a merciless fate. For instance, some indicate that a Mossad assassination squad shot Krug and buried him in a forest. Even stranger tales allege that Otto Skorzeny, the ex-Nazi commando affiliated with Gehlen, was blackmailed by Mossad into orchestrating Krug's death and shot him. To Sirrs, however, Skorzeny is an unlikely culprit when it comes to Krug's potential assassination.

Still, Skorzeny remains a ghostly figure on the fringes of German and Egyptian intelligence activities. Intelligence sources approached for this article declined to comment on Skorzeny's potential affiliation with the CIA. Nonetheless, someone walked away from the abandoned car in Munich knowing exactly where Krug was—taking the secret to the grave.

Zita Ballinger Fletcher is an award-winning author, defense journalist, and military historian. She enjoys writing on military leaders, tactics, and autonomous systems technology. Her work can be found in Forbes, Military Times, Defense News, Army Times, and numerous other publications. Follow her articles on LinkedIn.



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